

Chapter 53: AL-NAJM
(The Star: 1-12)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate

“By the star when it descends (1) your companion [Muhammad] has not strayed, nor has he erred (2) Nor does he speak from [his own] inclination (3) It is not but a revelation revealed (4) Taught to him by one mighty in power (5) One firm, with the ability to penetrate and perfect in spirit. And he rose to [his] true form (6) While he was in the higher [part of the] horizon (7) Then he approached and descended (8) And was at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer (9) And he revealed to His servant what He revealed (10) The heart did not lie [about] what it saw (11) Will you then dispute with him over what he saw? (12)”

Overview:

Revealed in Makkah, this surah of 62 verses derives its name from the word an-najm (the star) in the first verse. It is reported to be the first surah that Allah’s messenger, peace and blessings be upon him, recited publicly to a mixed assembly of believers and polytheists at Ka’bah. The surah warns the polytheists about their attitude towards the revelation of the Qur’an, and about their beliefs based on mere surmises. It also stresses that Islam is not a new, invented religion in human history, and threatens unbelievers with the judgment day that is bound to come.

The concepts of revelation and inspiration have been discussed extensively in Qur’anic sciences and by sufi schools, as they are important dimensions of divine effusion and manifestation. In the terminology of Qur’anic sciences, revelation denotes the meaning that Allah conveys or imparts some knowledge from His presence to His prophets with or without a means. It is also used for the spiritual words that He puts into the hearts of the prophets in ways unknown to us. In this sense revelation occurred in any one of the following three ways (42:51): God Almighty directly puts His message in His prophet’s heart and the prophet knows that this message is from God; or He conveys it to His chosen servants through their internal and external receptors such as their ears and inner senses; or He charges one obeyed and trustworthy angel to deliver His message. Mediating between God and His prophets, such a being is a witness on behalf of the Revealer for the one who received the revelation. According to the Qur'an and sunnah, this angel is Gabriel, peace be upon him. This kind of revealing through an angel is regarded as the main means of revelation.

The transcendent interaction of God with prophets and saints in their hearts is a special, most elevated favor that there is no other rank in the world comparable to it. This interaction occurs in the form of revelation with the prophets and of inspiration with the saints. Although prophets and saints appear to share the same heavenly table in being favored with this metaphysical interaction, revelation is an objective address which is clear in meaning and binding as a divine message, one that is witnessed and confirmed by the One who sends it, as well as the one who conveys it. As for inspiration, it is of a particular nature, open to interpretation, and since it is not conveyed by an angel, it is neither witnessed nor confirmed. Therefore, it is not a binding divine message. However, it can be seen and accepted as a means of illumination and clarification.

Both revelation and inspiration indicate the metaphysical and angelic aspect of humanity. It was by virtue of the breathing stated in the verse "I have breathed into him –Adam– out of My Spirit" (38:72) that man was favored with regency (khilafah) on earth. Just as this breathing is the source and mechanism of human life, so too is the revelation a source and mechanism of the spiritual life of humanity. This observation is further supported by the use of the word 'spirit' to mean 'revelation' as in (40:15).

Reason of Revelation:

During the first five years of his appointment, Rasulullah took every opportunity to call Makkans to Islam by talking them individually and attending their meetings, assemblies and trade fairs. The specific incident is not clear from existing reports, however it is clear that Makkans continued to belie Rasulullah, and made accusations that –God forbid– he has gone astray, he separates the lover from the beloved, he is speaking out of his own whims, etc. Under such circumstances Allah's messenger found an opportunity to address an assembly of believers (there were around 36 of them at that time) and unbelievers at Ka'bah. In fact, Ibn Mas'ud indicates that this was the first surah that Rasulullah had publicly recited before an assembly of the Quraish. At the end, when he recited the last verse commanding prostration (sajdah), the whole assembly fell down in prostration following him. Ibn Mas'ud says that even the chiefs of polytheists who were in the forefront of the opposition could not resist falling down in prostration; and that he saw only one man, Umayyah bin Khalaf, who did not make prostration but took a little dust and rubbing it on his forehead said that was enough for him. He further related that he saw this man die in the state of disbelief few years later.

Ibn Sad says that before this incident, in the fifth year of prophethood, Rasulullah sent a small group of (about 15 companions, of which 4 were women) to Abyssinia due to unbearable oppression against early Muslims in Makkah. Later, the above incident took place. When the emigrants in Abyssinia heard the news, they formed the impression that the disbelievers of Makkah had embraced Islam. Some of them returned to Makkah the same year only to learn that the news were wrong and the persecution was raging as furiously as before. Consequently, the second emigration to Abyssinia took place in which many more people (about 100 companions of which 19 were women) left Makkah. Thus, it is very likely that this surah was revealed around the fifth year of prophethood.

Ibn Mas'ud reported that this was the first surah which contained a verse of prostration (sajdah). There are reports that the verse 32 was revealed later in Madinah. Some scholars had the view that the next passage (verses 13-18) might have been revealed after the incident of ascension (mi'raj) took place still in Makkah, but a few years later.

Main Themes:

The surah as a whole contains all recurring main themes of the Qur'an. The main topic of this particular passage (verses 1-12) is to explain the nature of divine revelation given to Allah's messenger. Every aspect of the revelation is sound and strong. It is the word of Allah Almighty sent through the great angel Gabriel to the trustworthy messenger Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. It teaches the truth, wisdom and virtues, and is miraculous in every aspect. Among others, the passage therefore establishes authenticity of the office of nubuwwah.

Style:

The verses of the surah rhyme beautifully as each verse ends in the same long sound of ‘ā’. The words ‘hawa’ and ‘al-hawa’ in verses 1 and 3 present a lovely example of a full rhyme. The words ‘wahy’ and ‘yooaha’ that occur in verse 4 are derived from the same root ‘w-h-y’ (to reveal) which is an example of so-called derivational rhyme. In addition, that these two words occur in the same verse is a beautiful example of what is called an internal rhyme. Similar types of connections exist in pairs of words such as ‘dana-adna’, ‘awha-awha’, ‘raa-yara’, etc. The analogy of ‘two bow-lengths away’ is note-worthy among many other literary arts and artistic styles (use of words with double meanings, use of oaths, etc.) that require a lengthy discussion beyond the scope of this work.

It is due to this matchless beauty that Makkan chiefs who were masters of poetry and oratory found this surah awesome. They were overwhelmed by its beauty and couldn’t resist but made prostration for its eloquence at the end of the recitation even though they vehemently opposed to Islam. Qur’an is therefore answering in this surah the faulty labeling of revelation as Rasulullah’s own words not only by its luminous content but also its eloquent composition and exquisite style. Indeed, Qur’an cannot be the word of man, it is the word of Allah.

Noble Meaning:

1. (وَالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَوَىٰ) “*Say: By the star when it goes down*”

Scholars had different opinions about the meaning of the word ‘an-najm’. Some thought it referred to Pleiades, other said it is Sirius or even Venus. Yet others hold the view that here it has been used generically to mean star so that the verse states “When the day dawned, and the stars set.” Moreover, the word also means each piece of a whole that is delivered piecemeal. Applying this meaning to Qur’an, each passage of revelation sent to Rasulullah is called a ‘najm’. In view of the context, Yazir prefers this last interpretation. More detailed information about the star of Sirius may found in the following clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnDAW5g2fel>

2. (مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَىٰ) “*Your Companion (the Messenger) has neither gone astray nor adopted a wrong way (in belief and action).*”

This sentence and the following verses are the object of the previous oath. The word ‘sahib’ means a friend, a companion or a close associate. The reference to Rasulullah with this title is meaningful. It says Quraish that “Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is a man of your own clan and tribe. He lived long years among you. You know him full well in his character, his dealings, his ways, his habits, his life story, etc. Your accusation that he has gone astray or is misguided is utterly wrong.”

Here the significance of swearing by the setting stars is that in the darkness of night a person cannot see his surroundings clearly, and may form wrong judgments from their vague appearances. But when the stars have set and the day has dawned, everything appears in its real form and shape, and there remains no doubt. The same is the case with Rasulullah. His life and personality is not hidden in darkness, but is manifest before you like the bright dawn. You are aware that this “companion of yours” is a right-minded, wise man. You also know how honest and righteous person he is. How can one of you form the view that he has adopted a crooked way not only for himself but has started inviting others also to the same falsehood?

3. (وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ) “*He does not speak on his own, out of his own desire*”

He has neither been fabricating the Qur'an by himself, nor motivated by any selfish desire on his part. The revelation is being sent down to him by God. He did not intend to become a messenger of his own desire, but when Allah appointed him to that office through revelation. His invitation to Islam, his teachings of monotheism, the news he gives about the gathering of all mankind on the day of resurrection and their accountability, the truths that he is presenting about the universe and man, and the virtues he teaches for leading a pure life are not a philosophy propounded by himself. The knowledge of all this has been bestowed on him by revelation.

4. (إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ) “*That (which he conveys to you) is but a revelation that is revealed to him.*”

A question raised here about the extent of these verses. In addition to his office of prophethood, Rasulallah was also the official interpreter of the Qur'an. His speech interpreting the Qur'an was not revealed to him literally as the Qur'an was revealed, yet it was necessarily based on the same knowledge given by revelation. The main difference between the Qur'an and such interpretations was that the Qur'an was entirely from Allah both in word and in meaning, whereas the meanings of his hadith and sunnah (prophetic traditions) were from Allah, but the wording and expressions were his own. On the basis of this distinction, the Qur'an has been described as manifest revelation (wahi-jali, or matluww), and his other sayings as concealed revelation (wahi-khafi, or ghayr-i matluww).

Rasulallah practices ijtihad (passed a ruling that was expressing his personal view) when he did not receive direct revelation. On few occasions it so happened that his personal judgment was changed later by divine instruction. This shows that he was not allowed to choose what might be considered lesser than the best judgment; it was immediately rectified by manifest revelation.

5. (عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ) “*one of forceful might (Gabriel) has taught it*”

According to some people, “mighty in power” implies Allah Himself, but a great majority of the commentators are agreed that it implies the angel Gabriel, peace be upon him. Some scholars expressed doubt that Gabriel cannot be regarded as the teacher of Rasulallah. But this suspicion is misplaced, because Gabriel did not impart instruction from any personal knowledge of his own. There is no harm for one in a lower rank to teach a particular issue to another one higher in rank.

6. (ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ) “*One firm, with the ability to penetrate and perfect in spirit, rose with all his splendor*”

The word ‘dhu mirratin’ may mean beautiful and grand, strong and powerful, wise and sound in judgment. Gabriel being in charge of bringing revelation, Allah has endowed him both intellectual and physical powers to the highest degree. The second word in this verse may be translated in its reference to the messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him. Then the

verse states that “by receiving the Qur’an, the Messenger has attained full perfection and the greatest position.”

7. (وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَى) “when he was in the highest part of the horizon.”

The horizon means the eastern edge of the sky where the sun rises and the day dawns. The verse make it explicit that Rasulullah saw Gabriel as he had appeared on the horizon of the sky. There are several authentic traditions stating that the angel appeared in his true shape in which Allah has created him. Gabriel used to come to Allah’s messenger in different forms. He saw the angel in his original form twice: first when he descended from mount Nur after receiving the first Revelation; and again during his blessed ascension (mi’raj) later. The verse may, as before, be taken to refer to the Messenger implying his greatness.

8. (ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّ) “Then, he drew near and came close”

9. (فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَى) “So he was (so near that there was left only the distance between) the strings of two bows (put adjacent to each other) or even nearer (than that).”

After appearing on the uppermost edge of the sky, Gabriel started advancing towards the Prophet till he reached him. He then bent down to him and came within just two bow-lengths or even closer.

10. (فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَىٰ) “and He revealed to His servant what He revealed.”

The sentence allows two translations both meaning the same: Gabriel revealed to Allah’s servant whatever he revealed, or Allah revealed to His servant whatever He revealed.

11. (مَا كَذَّبَ الْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَى) “The heart did not contradict what he saw (with his eyes).”

The original of the word translated as “the heart” is fuad. It is the center or central sense of the (spiritual) heart. The heart has senses of hearing and seeing, and what perceives or comprehends any perception received by the heart is the ‘fuad’. Rasulullah observed all this awake in broad daylight with open eyes. His heart did not deem it was a delusion, or that it was an imaginary figure. His heart fully confirmed what his eyes saw. He did not doubt that it was the angel Gabriel and the message he was conveying was indeed God's revelation to him. He comprehended all its meanings as he memorized its composition.

12. (أَفْتُمَارُونَهُ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَى) “Will you then dispute with him concerning what he saw?”

Notes:

All aspects of revelation are strong and sound. It is the word of Allah Almighty sent through the great angel Gabriel to the trustworthy messenger Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. It is full of light and guidance, and is miraculous in every aspect.

The following video clip is about the cave of Hira where Rasulullah received revelation for the first time. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MQLRkfeXh4&feature=related>